

Soil and soul: Our Protestant agrarian past

by [Kevin M. Lowe](#) in the [September 16, 2015](#) issue



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The idea of environmental stewardship has so thoroughly structured contemporary Christian thought that almost all Christian organizations characterize their efforts to care for creation in terms of stewardship. The scholarly consensus has been that the idea of stewardship is a relatively recent phenomenon within American Christianity. Robert Booth Fowler, for instance, has argued that Protestants really awoke to environmental challenges only after the first Earth Day in 1970.

Not only is stewardship seen as a recent development, but historians have argued that it was originally a secular idea, adopted later by Christians. Typically, the idea of stewardship is traced back to Aldo Leopold's 1949 *A Sand County Almanac*. Mark Stoll, for instance, has argued that when Christianity embraced the idea of stewardship, it was "essentially an act of baptism of the thoroughly secular Aldo

Leopold's 'land ethic.'"

Significant as Leopold's land ethic was, Protestant agrarians had in fact developed the idea of stewardship a decade or more earlier than Leopold. During the Depression, they were already constructing a theology of agriculture and conservation that looked very much like Leopold's. This theology of stewardship was developed in congregations, on farms, and in the meetings of missionary organizations and government offices. It wove together the three elements that environmental historian Donald Worster argues were new in Leopold's thought: science, ecology, and the importance of community.

For much of the 20th century, mainline Protestants were more concerned than anyone else with rural communities. Protestant agrarians staunchly defended family farms, small-scale agriculture, and face-to-face rural communities. But by 1930, when agrarians looked at the countryside, they could not avoid seeing the environmental consequences of the industrial transformation of agriculture. One of the biggest problems they noticed was the widespread degradation of the soil caused by intensive and short-sighted agricultural practices. Particularly in the Midwest, where vast expanses of monocropped fields were typical, erosion of the land was drastic and rapid. By the time the Depression hit, soil erosion was so severe that estimates placed the number of ruined acres at approximately 35 million, with hundreds of millions of additional acres severely damaged. It would take nature on its own, according to the government, at least 400 years to replace just one inch of lost topsoil.

For decades, Protestant agrarians devoted themselves to the cause of soil conservation, joining with secular groups as well as the federal government to encourage farmers to protect and rebuild their soil. They devised both theological justifications and concrete plans for dealing with soil degradation. They called upon farmers to see it as their duty to conserve the land that God had created.

The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl caused the federal government to begin addressing soil degradation. The Roosevelt administration created the Soil Erosion Service as part of the Department of the Interior in 1933, and in 1935 the SES was transferred to the Department of Agriculture and renamed the Soil Conservation Service.

But the cause of soil conservation was never the exclusive province of agricultural scientists and federal officials. Religious leaders of all kinds championed the idea that soil conservation was a Christian duty. In 1943, John Reisner, director of Agricultural Missions, Inc., stated that “the whole world must recover reverence for the land. . . . We dare no longer dissociate religion and land in our everyday thinking or in our Christian worship.” Reisner believed that to damage God’s land was not just foolish but deeply sinful. “If there is any one clear lesson taught in the Bible and borne out by the experience of mankind,” he argued, “it is that the wrong use of land is not only a crime against society but a sin against the living God.”

As early as 1922, Edwin L. Earp, professor of sociology at Drew University, published *Biblical Backgrounds for the Rural Message*, in which he argued that the biblical writers had a “consciousness of rural facts and situations else they could not have used them intelligently nor could their hearers or readers have understood them unless they, too, were rural-minded.” Earp provided scriptural references for a wide variety of agrarian arguments and principles, ranging from agricultural procedures to community life and the building of the kingdom of God. On the importance of the land itself, for example, Earp pointed not to Genesis but to Leviticus 25:1–23 and Deuteronomy 11:11–12, in which the promised land and the Year of Jubilee were described. Earp drew a lesson about soil fertility and soil conservation from Matthew 13:3–8—the parable of the sower—and from Jeremiah 4:3, in which the Israelites are instructed not to sow amidst thorns. “The church must preach and teach the gospel of the sacredness of the soil,” Earp concluded, “as the gift of God in trust for all the people, the sin of soil depletion and the peril to the nation when the land is robbed of its crop-producing values.”

Congregationalist leader Malcolm Dana published *Christ of the Countryside* in 1937, in which he retold the life of Jesus from an agricultural perspective. Dana emphasized the ways in which Jesus’ language betrayed his country origins: “Christ of the Countryside is acquainted with the agriculture of his time and country; and he believes in the dignity and worth of an avocation which has more to do with creative processes than any other. . . . Thirty-two of his sixty-four parables take his listeners out into the open country, and thirty-seven of his forty-eight miracles have an outdoor background. . . . Such knowledge and use of the world of growing things naturally result in a special interest in the farmer and farming of Palestine.” To Dana, and to other Protestant agrarians, Jesus had an agricultural mind.

Building on this biblical understanding, denominational leaders helped promote soil conservation. In 1937, for instance, Mark Dawber, superintendent of the Department of Town and Country Work for the Methodist Board of Home Missions, criticized Americans for their improper attitude toward the earth, relying on the moral force of another of Jesus' parables: "It is this sense of stewardship of the land that is lost. We have wasted its riches prodigally, and now we are learning the bitter lesson of the prodigal." Dawber was a major proponent of the government's soil conservation efforts because of his Protestant agrarian ethic, not primarily because of conservation's scientific or economic benefits. "We have sinned against God's holy earth through ignorance, selfishness and greed," wrote Dawber. "Fortunately, a new day is dawning. We are waking to our unfaithful stewardship and our perils. . . . The church has a responsibility to keep before its people the sacred trust that is involved in the stewardship of the soil."

A broadly ecumenical statement called "Man's Relation to the Land" was published in 1945, signed by representatives from dozens of Christian denominations and organizations, both Protestant and Catholic, as well as rabbis, Jewish seminary professors, and representatives from the Jewish Agricultural Society. The statement acknowledged that "the land is God's greatest material gift to mankind. . . . Ownership of land does not give an absolute right to use or abuse, nor is it devoid of social responsibilities. It is in fact a stewardship."

The ecumenical group agreed that family farm ownership was to be encouraged because the family was the primary unit of society, and that living standards, wages, and Social Security benefits ought to be broadly and justly available to all. But stewarding the land was fundamental, because "the land steward has a duty to enrich the soil he tills and to hand it down to future generations as a thank offering to God, the giver, and as a loving inheritance to his children's children."

By 1950, a columnist for *Progressive Farmer* predicted that in the coming decade, rural Christians would be increasingly devoted to the idea of soil conservation. "A growing emphasis will be made on the relation that exists between man, land, and God," wrote James Sells. "This will result in preaching and teaching the necessity for the salvation of the soil and continued control of soil erosion." Sells, in keeping with the eschatological view of other Protestant agrarians, saw conservation as a matter of supreme importance. "The former emphasis was to escape hell and gain heaven. The future emphasis will be [to] drive evil out of the present world and to establish heaven on earth, thus making the Christian a fit occupant for the heaven to come."

The social gospel of societal perfection remained strong among Protestant agrarians into the 1950s.

During that decade, the federal government began experimenting again with rural policy, with an interest in stemming the epidemic of rural poverty and agricultural industrialization. The USDA Rural Development Program, instituted in 1955, was, according to Laura Kolar, “the first federal effort to recognize the changing needs for, uses and role of rural America’s resources, including farms themselves, after World War II.” The RDP set up pilot community development projects through the USDA Extension Service. These projects extended credit to farmers seeking improvements, offered technical assistance for conservation practices and ancillary sources of farm income like forestry, and set up recreational opportunities aimed at rural people. Although the program was chronically underfunded when compared with other USDA programs, its contributions nevertheless paved the way for federal conservation efforts in the 1960s and ’70s.

The National Council of Churches, founded in 1950, applauded the USDA’s efforts. In response, Undersecretary of Agriculture True D. Morse, director of the program invited the NCC to participate in the program’s organization and activities. A full-time NCC staff member, based in Memphis, was appointed to work exclusively with the program and was “available for consultation to churches and church groups and secular agencies as well as local, state and federal government agencies working in the program.” The NCC, in keeping with its policy that “the church has had an historic concern for the wise use of the earth’s resources and believes that proper conservation of natural and human resources are [*sic*] basic to the fulfillment of Christian stewardship,” found the RDP beneficial.

The NCC encouraged pastors to discuss the Rural Development Program with their parishioners, emphasizing “the unity of life, cooperation and working with others, concern for those less fortunate, and helping people to help themselves.” In addition, ministers as well as laypeople served on the county-level and state-level committees that administered the RDP. Christian presence was prominent, because the federal government realized the importance of engaging rural Christians and church leaders in the effort to improve rural life.

Leaders of the NCC’s Department of the Town and Country Church began to realize that the challenges facing American farmers were deeper than simply economic. The department acknowledged that “many churches of rural America had a deep and

abiding interest in 'the land' and the role that it should play in the future of American Agriculture."

In 1955, the department sponsored a conference at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary that focused directly on the issue of land stewardship. It was attended by representatives from the NCC and leaders from the major rural denominations; representatives from the USDA Agricultural Research Service, Soil Conservation Service, Farmers Home Administration, Farm Credit Administration, and National Association of Conservation Districts; members of the major farm organizations such as the Farm Foundation, American Farm Bureau Federation, and National Grange; and academics interested in rural and religious issues.

The authors of a preconference paper circulated by the NCC suggested four essential principles of conservation. First, land use should always be in the service of humans, and "the good of the land should never take precedence over human well-being." Second, land use was immediately important; planning should address the needs of people currently living on the land. Third, although immediate needs were critical, land use should look to the needs of future generations as well, because "Christian stewardship morally obligates each generation to pass on a land resource of higher quality than it received." And fourth, any conservationist work needed to recognize the ultimate sovereignty of God, and that "a 'good life' is the result of faithful relation to Him."

The NCC also distributed a list of relevant scripture passages, from both the Old and New Testaments, as proof texts for the principles they suggested, including Micah 4:4—an illustration of what the authors called "the ideal land tenure"—which read, "but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it."

At Louisville, the conference accepted the four principles and set forth a broad definition of stewardship: "Christian stewardship is the systematic practice of using all one's powers and the material assets which have been entrusted to one's care for the furtherance of God's will and the fulfillment of His purpose." But using material resources responsibly was difficult. The conference agreed that "it is impossible to separate the stewardship of one resource from that of the others." In an agricultural context, this meant that soil was a "dynamic" resource, one whose health is constantly affected by other environmental changes.

A study guide for the conference proceedings, distributed by the NCC and aimed at rural pastors, reemphasized the importance of taking care of the soil. “No matter how many devastating wars, no matter how many new boundaries and no matter how much shifting of peoples over the earth, there is one unchanging phenomenon—world without end, community by community—and that is dependence on the land.” The guide urged pastors to learn as much about the local land situation as possible and to introduce conservation and land use questions into their sermons and discuss them in Sunday school classes and adult gatherings. The study guide also suggested that churches create farm and land stewardship committees and “think about setting up a revolving loan fund to help one or more young couples get started [in farming].”

Critics of the churches’ involvement with conservation seem to have been in the minority. The spiritual necessity of soil conservation was apparent not only to religious professionals; it appeared in ostensibly secular places as well and was widely publicized. In the 1940s, building on its successful promotion of conservation measures during the Dust Bowl, the Soil Conservation Service published a small booklet called *The Lord’s Land*. Written by Morris Fonda in cooperation with the conservationist organization Friends of the Land, and financed and published by the Sears-Roebuck Foundation, the booklet described the work of the SCS in deeply religious terms.

The SCS booklet began, as so many agrarian documents did, with Psalm 24. If “the earth was the Lord’s,” then humans had a vocation to stewardship.

The Christian perspective that had structured the soil conservation movement for decades received another boost in the 1950s with the involvement of the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts. This organization, created in 1946, oversaw a network of 1,638 soil conservation districts. Those districts had been created under the SCS as departments of state governments and were responsible for devising conservation plans appropriate to the local area. Typically they formed voluntary agreements with landowners to have their recommendations carried out. In many states they also enacted binding regulations concerning land use. By the 1960s, conservation districts encompassed nearly 2 billion acres of land, with participation by 92 percent of the nation’s farms.

In 1955, less than ten years after the formation of the NASCD, the organization began appealing to the nation’s Christians for help in promoting soil conservation.

The organization threw its weight behind an annual observance called Soil Stewardship Sunday, when churches were called to address the issue of soil conservation either in the regular sermon for that day or in special added services.

Soil Stewardship Sunday had been initially devised by the publishers of *Farm and Ranch* magazine as “Soil and Soul Sunday” in 1946. Because response among its readership was strongly positive, the magazine offered the idea to the NASCD in the fall of 1954. The following spring, the NASCD became the sole sponsor of Soil Stewardship Sunday. In 1956, the NASCD expanded the observance from a single day into Soil Stewardship Week, scheduled between the fifth and sixth Sundays of Easter. The decision to expand the observance from a single day to a full week was based on the recognition that many churches were already observing the fifth Sunday after Easter as Rural Life Sunday.

Like Rural Life Sunday before it, Soil Stewardship Sunday drew on the influence of national government. Rural Life Sunday had been heavily promoted by 4-H and the USDA Extension Service. Similarly, the NASCD, and in particular the advisory committee that oversaw the stewardship observance, operated from an explicitly Christian standpoint that saw stewardship as the responsibility of all true Christians.

Each year the NASCD published materials for churches that would assist them with discussing and promoting stewardship among their congregations. The NASCD’s simplest message was that the earth was a gift easily destroyed. Soil in particular was an astounding ecosystem unto itself, which both gave life to growing plants and absorbed decomposing organisms. “While these two processes seem to be in opposition to each other,” the NASCD wrote in 1957, “they actually are in complete harmony. They are engaged in a collaboration so harmonious and so intricate that it should cause the child of God to stand in awe at the wisdom of his Creator.” Pastors all around the nation adopted Soil Stewardship Sunday in their churches and preached on environmental stewardship.

By 1970, however, the energy in the Christian agrarian movement had largely dissipated. Major agrarian publications had gone out of existence by the end of the 1960s: the *Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin* ceased publication in 1968, as did the NCC’s organ *Town and Country Church*. The NCC’s National Convocation on the Church in Town and Country published its last report in 1964.

Institutional memory could be short. In 1970, one participant presented a position paper at an NCC conference arguing that member churches should develop a position on environmental activism but made no reference to the decades-long tradition of environmental thought among Christian agrarians.

By the early 1970s, Christian agrarianism had become largely invisible. The decline of Christian agrarianism seems to have gone largely unmentioned, even by agrarians themselves, which makes it difficult to explain the change. Still, it is possible to speculate as to some likely factors.

Clear changes in the economics of American agriculture must have had their effects. In the early 1970s, U.S. farm exports, which ever since the Depression had kept fairly steady with imports, suddenly spiked. The Soviet Union began purchasing tremendous quantities of wheat and other commodity crops, “turning public discussion from chronic grain surpluses to shortages.” After 1972, agricultural exports dramatically exceeded imports. Industrialized agriculture was poised to provide for this international demand, whereas family-farm agriculture was focused inward on the local community.

Other economic changes between 1950 and 1970 affected the agricultural landscape. The total number of American farms was still dropping precipitously; there were only about half as many farms in 1970 as there had been in 1950. The remaining farms were larger, with the average farm rising from about 175 acres at the end of World War II to over 400 by the mid-1970s. The farm population in 1970 was about one-third of what it had been at the end of the war, and the urban population was increasing even faster than the farm population was declining. Meanwhile, the market value of agricultural land had increased steadily. Farm household income also grew rapidly in the postwar period; in the 1960s, the median farm household income increased by almost 6 percent each year. By 1990, farm households were making almost four times as much as they had in 1950.

In this changed climate, where farmers were fewer but more prosperous, mainline Christian agrarians must certainly have lost hope of being able to stem the tide. Their projects, arguments, and theologies over the previous decades had had an influence on people, congregations, and communities, but not on the overall agricultural economy. Despite their best efforts, industrial agriculture had become entrenched and made the family farm, as the agrarians conceived it, seem increasingly anachronistic. Mainline churches began to turn their attention to the

developing world, where they focused less on agriculture itself than on poverty relief and rural aid. Programs like the Christian Rural Overseas Program and the Heifer Project encouraged American farmers to see themselves as part of a larger world community. If industrial agriculture could not be stopped, at least its negative effects could be alleviated.

At the same time, suburbanization and affluence created a set of expectations that made the hard work of farming and rural life seem even less appealing. The middle class had grown significantly since World War II, and it was easier for many people to make a decent living. Food, housing, and consumer goods were cheaper than they had been earlier in the century. Many cities were no longer the dirty, inhumane industrial wastelands they had seemed to the agrarians at the beginning of the century.

Christian agrarians also found themselves increasingly out of step among American Protestants. Their quiet commitment to their social gospel heritage did not align with the tremendous visibility of the new evangelicals who were beginning to dominate American culture. Agrarians, and mainline Protestants in general, had no interest in forming megachurches or sponsoring mass revivals. The savvy preaching style of figures like Billy Graham did not appeal to agrarians. In fact, outsized evangelical congregations contradicted the most fundamental philosophy of agrarianism: that communities should be small, personal, and neighborly. From an agrarian perspective, there was nothing neighborly about a church service in a sports stadium. Evangelicals and mainline Protestants both spoke of the kingdom of God, but they did so in very different ways. Mainline churches continued to lose membership in significant numbers, and the effect of their agrarian witness was drastically reduced.

In terms of simply stopping industrial agriculture or expanding mainline denominations, Christian agrarians certainly failed—although environmental stewardship is once again a topic of discussion in many churches. But their influence cannot adequately be measured by counting farms or congregations. Rather, it can be seen in the degree to which agrarian ideas were received into the broader culture, including the environmental and conservation movements. This may in fact be the most critical reason that agrarians seem to have receded from the spotlight.

After 1970, the secular environmental movement took primary responsibility for promoting agricultural conservation and soil stewardship. Environmentalists

developed the idea of “sustainable agriculture” as a countercultural alternative to conventional agriculture, and this new language overshadowed the long history of agrarian conservation. National advocacy groups like American Farmland Trust have taken up the agrarian commitment to family farms. The belief that society is bettered when families own their own land and have close relationships with their communities is lived out in farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture programs.

A new generation of young farmers is now purchasing land and starting small farms (sometimes even in the middle of cities), trying to revive localized agriculture. If proponents of these things do not always refer to God in the same breath, at least they are doing the things that the early 20th-century Protestant agrarians had wanted.

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